

Is There a Future Life?

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“CAN we be sure that there is a future life?”

That depends upon what we mean by being sure. There are different kinds of certainty. If anyone is unwilling to take the word of the multiplication table for it, he can be sure that seven times seven is forty-nine by taking a number of counters, arranging them in rows and adding them up. We are equally sure that our neighbours are real persons, but we cannot prove it in the same way or with the same kind of certainty. We may be dreaming, and they may be mere figments of our dreams. For that matter, we cannot prove the objective reality of the physical universe itself. There are people who hold that it has no existence other than that which their thought confers upon it; we may ridicule them, but we cannot prove that they are wrong. So it is with belief in a future life. We can hold it with confidence, with serenity, with unshakable conviction, even though—being the kind of belief it is—we cannot reduce it to the terms

of a mathematical demonstration. For here we are moving in that free and undetermined world of values to which science does not possess a key.

Our first, though not our most important reason for belief in a future life is that it is instinctive and that this instinctive belief is almost universal. The burial customs of prehistoric man show that it is older than history, and from the dawn of history we find it everywhere. In ancient India the belief gives point to India's greatest and most popular poem, the Bhagavad Gita. In Egypt it is recorded in the Book of the Dead. When Homer was wandering through the cities of ancient Greece, he sang of another world where good men would enjoy happy experiences and where bad men would meet with retributive justice. The Chinese with their ancestor worship (why worship the spirits of ancestors unless they are still influential?); the Roman with his Lares and Penates; the writers of the Nibelungenlied with their fierce Valkyries conducting slain heroes to a boisterous Valhalla; the North American Indian with his happy hunting ground: all of them unite in taking it for granted that death

is not the end of human personality.

As time goes on the belief is refined and becomes increasingly ethical and increasingly spiritual, but it does not grow less strong. Dante held it more firmly than did Homer or Vergil; Robert Browning's "Easter Day" voiced it more convincingly than it had been voiced by earlier English poets. (Recently, misled by the materialistic idea that human personality can be explained in terms of physics and chemistry, men have begun to doubt whether the mind can survive the dissolution of the brain; but even as they doubt, the newer physics itself, moving on to higher ground, has out-moded materialism and is seeking the answer of the riddle of the universe in quite other and more idealistic terms.)

Nowadays we are learning to attach increasing importance to our instincts and our intuitive perceptions. "The heart has its reasons," said Blaise Pascal. "Those reasons are very weighty," say modern philosophers like Bergson and psychologists like Jung. The "reasons of the heart," although more primitive, are quite often more dependable than those which proceed from the intellect, especially if the human intellect is un-

aided by revelation. When we "do our own thinking," sometimes the results are laughable. The history of medical prescriptions is a case in point. But when nature, the universal mother, does our thinking for us and supplies us with instincts, we may indeed and often do misinterpret them but we must not ignore them, because nature has never yet implanted a universal instinct for which there exists no corresponding reality. We need to eat, and somewhere there is food, whether or not we succeed in locating it. We wish to sleep, and somewhere, whether in cave or on tree-top or on the second story of a comfortable home a bed awaits us. We want children, and the mating of the sexes makes it possible to have them. We desire possessions, and earth's abundance and man's ingenuity and labour conspire to provide them. We look forward to a future life,—and what? Certainly this, that it would be without a parallel in human experience if in this instance nature has implanted in us generally a meaningless instinct, one which has no basis in fact.

There is another reason for our belief in a future life which, taken in conjunction with the first, has cumulative force. So far as we know,

the world is truly rational. Scientists take this for granted and regard it as an axiom, for without it science would be quite impossible. Admitting its rationality, "What is it for?" is the sanest, the profoundest, the most fundamental and the most searching question that can be asked about this admittedly rational world. And any long-range answer must take into account the destiny of the only being on earth who ever raises the question: *Homo Sapiens*, Man the Thinker. And the only answer that is rational is this: The world exists for the education and perfection of spiritual beings who will outlast it and fulfill their destinies beyond it, clothed with immortality. For if nothing outlasts it, then from a rational viewpoint the world becomes totally devoid of ultimate meaning; all design exhibited in it ends in frustration, all purpose discerned in it is doomed to defeat, and the unimaginable vastness of its processes becomes an absurdity, like the blowing of gigantic soap-bubbles across a background of cosmic night. Human reason, if true to itself, cannot tolerate so irrational a conclusion. This is to attach cosmic significance to man

himself, but to do so is not self-glorification, for nature bids us do it by letting us into the secret of man's place in the physical universe and of the preparations which have been made for him. The principle of evolution, once the bugbear of religious people, has now become a pillar in the temple of their philosophy. Once the earth was covered with grey, lifeless oceans; and one day a new thing: life appeared there in its lowest forms, but with infinite possibilities of development. Æons upon æons passed; ranks upon ranks of inferior forms of life were scythed down; the earth was the home of plants and insects and reptiles and animals of the lower order, and one day, again a new thing: man appeared as the apex of the physical creation and began his age-long process of development. "Cycles and cycles ferried my cradle" cried Walt Whitman, "rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen." And the poet, the "Seer," was right.

For from that time on, the time of the appearance of *Homo Sapiens*, Man the Thinker, the world has had but one meaning that by any stretch of the imagination may be termed rational, and that is the improvement of man, the

education of man, the preparation of man for an eternal destiny. For he alone, of all the teeming progeny to which nature has given birth, shows himself capable of endless improvement. Not physically, but in strength and agility he is far surpassed by many of the lower animals. Perhaps not mentally, for during the past two millenniums he has not outdistanced Plato as a thinker. But morally, spiritually, in truth and beauty and goodness of character, that is, in the realm of the ultimate values, yes, and there his possible development is unending and at his best he knows it. "That surface that tells the heavens it hath an end cannot persuade me I have any. . . There is surely a piece of divinity in us; something that was before the elements, and owes no homage unto the sun."

That was grandly thought by Sir Thomas Browne, and grandly said, but it is not enough. The voice of instinct may for once be deceptive; the voice of reason may proceed from "wishful thinking"; in order to be sure we need confirmation of our belief in a future life from the only source from which it can come with supreme and absolute authority, that is, from revelation.

We need a very word of the Maker Himself, the Creator of life, to verify our instincts, vindicate our reasonings, and justify our hopes.

For the Christian that word has been spoken, once and forever, by One who stands at the center of history, so that all time before His coming is time antecedent, all time thereafter is time subsequent; who is and who remains the meeting-place of time and eternity; our Lord Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God. And His word resolves all doubt for us because He tells us that "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living," and that all "live unto Him."

With gravity and simplicity, but also with startling directness, the Lord Jesus teaches the doctrine of the Divine Fatherhood and makes it the substance of His Gospel. "Father" is His only name for God. Of course, as applied to God, the name is an analogy, a comparison. What it means is that "at the center of the universe there is that which more nearly resembles a father's loving heart than any other earthly thing to which we may compare it." We use great words about God, with little knowledge of their meaning. We call Him "Eternal," but are ourselves so

limited by time and space that we cannot conceive the meaning of eternity. We call Him "Almighty," yet are continually limiting His power to the pitifully small dimensions of our knowledge of His exercise of it. We call Him "Maker of heaven and earth," and are troubled about His ability to find dwelling places for our souls when they leave our present bodies! All these words are true, but no less true, and no less great, and infinitely more comprehensible is the name that Jesus gives Him: "Father."

That is all we need to know in order to be sure of our survival of bodily death. Picture a human father letting the life of a beloved child be forever extinguished if he had the power to prevent it: the thought is incredible. God has the power. He is the Creator of all things, visible and invisible. He is the Source of all life, known and unknown. Of His power to give us immortality there is no more doubt than of His power to bring us into existence; the only question is of His desire, and that in turn depends upon the value He places upon us.

The value a father places upon a child, that is the answer given in the Gospel. God loves this

world of men and women to whom He has given life, loves them, and has a purpose for them which runs through the ages. That eternal purpose is what gives meaning to the ages, continuity to history, and the Christian answer to the riddle of the universe. "The earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the revealing of the sons of God." "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God: and such we are." If God is indeed something like a father, we can be sure of a never-ending future. If He were not, we should not wish to live on indefinitely; apart from fellowship with Him the horizons of unending life might well strike terror into our hearts.

"Shall we meet and know our loved ones in the future life?" The question has already been answered. The eternal purpose which runs through the ages is a social purpose. The eternal redemption is a social redemption. There is no such being a solitary Christian: the essence of the Christian religion is fellowship; its goal is a redeemed humanity, in which many members, consciously related to one head, our Lord Jesus Christ, are consciously related to one another.

That is what we mean by our doctrine of the Communion of Saints, i.e., eternal fellowship through Christ with one another. God is the "Bond of souls," and survival, like salvation itself, is only possible in terms of relationship.

"Will our loved ones keep on growing after death?" The possibility of continual growth in the love and service of God is taken for granted at every service of the Holy Communion, where in the prayer for the whole state of Christ's Church we bless God for those departed this life in His faith and fear and pray that He will grant them this continual growth. It is implied in the parable of our Lord when He promises that those who in this life have been faithful over a few things will be made rulers over many things when they enter into His joy. This implies no less a thing than that we as persons are to be associated with the divine government in tasks for which spiritual growth will make us competent. Already, though now only in "a few things" and in a limited way, we know with St. Paul the joy of being co-workers with God in His continuous creation. The very nature of human personality, its incompleteness and its perfectibility, requires

this opportunity of growth. Impersonal things, such as trees and animals, are strictly limited in the possibilities of growth, but the interests of the mind, the sympathies and affections of the heart, the aspirations of the soul, have no such limit: they require eternity for their reasonable fulfilment. And again revelation comes to the support of reason with a triumphant vindication of it: God is not the God of the dead, but of the living, and life means growth. "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be."

In a single word, Christ is the answer to all the questions that we may properly ask in this connection. He has revealed the character of God to us, the God of love. He has given us dignity in our own eyes by teaching us when we pray to address God as our Father. He has brought life and immortality to light by His own victory over sin and death, forever solemnizing them for us by His Cross. And He has interpreted to us the conditions of the future life, as far as it is now possible for us to understand them, by the manner in which He showed Himself to His disciples after His resurrection. They recognized likeness

and difference. Likeness, which enabled them to know Him, and to know that they stood in the same relationship to Him as before. Christians still know Him so, and by faith identify the spiritual Christ with the Jesus of history. Difference, because His spiritual body had new properties; new, but appropriate to the new conditions of the future life. As for the "many mansions" of the Father's house, and the "place" which He has prepared for His disciples, whether we think of those mansions in terms of interpenetrating spheres of space (an opinion encouraged by some mathematicians) or serenely leave the matter in the all-competent hands of the eternal Maker, really matters very little. The thing that matters supremely is that for our belief in a future life, and the continuance of the loving relationships of this life, we have the great confirming voices not only of instinct and of reason but of a revelation that stills our doubts and fears.

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